

A Festival Full of Roses and Castles

In stark black, white and red with dashes of bright green and yellow, Roger looked as eye-catching as ever and had drawn a crowd. At just over 71 feet long, decorated with a few of the traditional paintings and built in 1936, Roger is one of twenty, or so, remaining wooden narrow boats kept in working order. Positioned at Batchworth Lock she provided the perfect centre-piece for the Rickmansworth Festival.

The festival, which is held on the third weekend in May each year, was attended by over 20,000 people. It is the annual fundraising event for the Rickmansworth Waterways Trust, whose aim is to celebrate and raise awareness of the history and heritage of the Grand Union Canal and the surrounding environment. The money raised by the festival helps fund educational activities for various groups; from the cubs and brownies through to an experience programme designed for 16 – 24 year olds.

This year's festival activities were centred around the Batchworth Lock and Rickmansworth Aquadrome. Over 100 canal boats of varying shapes and sizes were attracted to the event. Moored four deep across and stretching along the towpath as far as the eye could see, the boats provided a colourful embodiment of life on the canals.

The 'best dressed boat' competition had encouraged some extra effort; many boats were freshly painted with gleaming brass work, streamers, flags and decorative water-jugs, buckets and knotted fenders. Some boats were a work of art with their 'rose and castle' paintings, in bright primary colours, depicting gentle, rural landscapes. Intricate geometric or floral patterns extended along some roof lines, through the signage and down the gang planks.

For those visitors keen to learn a little more, there were various friendly enthusiasts or local experts on hand to provide snippets of information, or talk in great detail, about life on the waterways. Rides up and down the canal were available – an ideal opportunity to briefly enjoy this gentle form of transport – and a visit to Roger or Renfrew provided an understanding of what living on the water, in a confined space (with a cabin floor space of about 13 feet square), was like.

Off the water the festival provided an array of shopping opportunities and entertainment. The tree-lined entrance to the Aquadrome was a make-shift 'high street' of stalls. Herbal remedies and healing crystals lead you towards the delicately fringed shawls and harem trousers, hat stands and musical instruments (even a didgeridoo). Smells of incense and candy-floss enveloped you then gave way to freshly cooked bacon sandwiches. Crafts and cakes stalls fought for the shopper's attention and delayed their passage forward.

Over the metallic chimes of the ice-cream van and the screams of the children on the bouncy castle, the public address system encouraged everyone to come and see the latest act performing on the stage. People sat or stood to see a local choir then various bands, everyone keen to cheer on neighbours or relatives who were performing and to unofficially appraise each act. A few young children, unable to see, created their own dance 'troupe' and entertained the surrounding adults.

As the afternoon teas turned to wine or beer and the fair lights went on, a new crowd gathered to savour the evening's entertainment. Dressed to party they were keen to win a teddy bear and go on the swing boat before enjoying the musical extravaganza.

Rain-free, the weather was kind and the mood was upbeat. Despite anxious concern beforehand, the donations from the crowds were generous and the fundraising has been enough to enable Roger and the charity to keep working for another year.